

On the MOUNTAIN

Keeping your own faith

STORY BY MIKE LATONA

Katie Lewis is a regular participant with the St. Gregory/St. Anne youth group in Marion and Palmyra. She has attended several diocesan retreats and conventions as well.

However, Catholic events only make up part of Katie's list of religious activities.

She also attends youth group at the Second Reformed Church in Marion and is a veteran of Baptist conventions and summer camps. In fact, she recently attended the American Baptist Youth Convention in Syracuse.

Katie, as well as others interviewed for this story, values both Catholic and non-Catholic religious doings. In her eyes, these events serve to unite Christians, rather than highlight the differences between their denominations.

"They bring me closer to people who are committed to the same things," said Katie, 15.

In Geneseo, Jen Migliore attends youth-group meetings at two churches: St. Mary's Parish on Sunday mornings, and the Baptist church in town on Thursday nights. The Baptist meetings, she said, are attended by Episcopalians and Methodists as well.

"They're about your faith (in God), not necessarily your religion," said Jen, 17.

When that group does discuss differences in their denominations, she said, the talks are amiable.

"They want to learn about the concept and idea," Jen reported.

For instance, she said, "We got into discussions about heaven and hell. I was the only one who believed in purgatory, and we had a long discussion about it."

Audrey Smerbeck got a close-up look at the Mormon faith when she attended the Hill Cumorah Pageant near Palmyra last summer with her mother and brother. The event is held on the site where Joseph Smith, founder of the Mormon faith (also known as the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints) is said to have



Greg Francis/Staff photographer
Katie Lewis, a participant in the St. Gregory/St. Anne Catholic youth group in Marion and Palmyra, has attended Camp Vick, a Baptist youth camp in Arcade, for three years.

discovered tablets in the 1800s that were allegedly written by the prophet Mormon around 400 A.D.

Audrey said that pageant volunteers offered her a brochure listing a phone number for those who wish to learn more about the Mormon faith. But, Audrey said, she'd rather stick with her own.

"I was raised Catholic. Something inside me says it's right," explained Audrey, 14, from St. Louis Church in Pittsford.

Rich Rasmussen and his wife, Deb, youth ministers at St. Francis Solanus Church in Interlaken and Holy Cross Church in Ovid,

encourage teens to take part in the local chapter of Young Life, a nondenominational Christian organization for adolescents. And, on a recent weekend, the Rasmussens accompanied some teens to a youth-group meeting at a Free Methodist church in Binghamton.

"I think that seeing kids walking in their faith, strong in their belief even if it's not necessarily the Catholic perspective, is something they want," Rasmussen said.

Rasmussen said that Catholics, also, should embrace what they've been taught — which means keeping a distinction between those beliefs and the beliefs voiced at non-Catholic religious events. This is something he emphasizes with the teens in his group.

"It's a delicate balance," he said.

Jen observes this balance by attending the Baptist church meetings but not attending the Sunday services.

"I think I'd consider it a new experience, but I really only like the Catholic service. It's me, really," Jen said.

Katie, as well, said she would not be interested in joining a Second Reformed or Baptist church. Up to this point, she added, her friends from those churches have not pressured her to join.

"I haven't sensed that at all yet. I hope I don't," she said.

Thirty or 40 years ago, Michael Thesen said, it would have been unthinkable for a Catholic teen to go to Protestant youth group.

However, Thesen noted, the Second Vatican Council of the 1960s — which produced a sweeping series of Catholic Church reforms — called for greater cooperation between Catholics and people of other faiths.

"This generation believes that there are many faces but one God. Not 'Don't set foot near this church or hang out with

these people,'" said Thesen, who serves as diocesan youth ministry coordinator. When he was a youth minister in Richmond, Va., Thesen would take his youth group on what he called "Protestant field trips," visiting teens from other denominations.

"If you don't have anything to compare (Catholicism) to," he said, "you don't realize what's unique about what you are." Yet Thesen also stressed that Catholic teens should have a good handle on their own faith before they go to non-Catholic religious events.

"I always encourage a youth minister to go attend the group, meet with the leaders and ask what kind of theology is being taught."

Thesen said, "And also to prepare young people for this by teaching them what the Catholic experience is. If you don't know your own identity, you're going to be lost and confused."

For instance, Thesen said, if a Catholic teen returned from a born-again Christian event claiming to have been saved, he would point out that "we're saved as Catholics by the sacrament of baptism, and we don't need to be reborn but to recommit ourselves to Christ every day."

Many faces, one God

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